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ABSTRACT

A two-year study of how writing teachers teach writing uncovered two significant facts: (1) there is a high rate of frustration and burnout among composition teachers because they are teaching by a system that conflicts with their own experience as writers, and (2) a small but vocal minority of teachers who teach from their own writing experience, successfully, make a distinction between "writing" and "composition." Composition is seen as product-oriented, focusing primarily on form, although by controlling form the teachers often control content also. Writing is seen as process-oriented, with structure taught incidentally as needed. In the former, work is criticized for its flaws; in the latter, reinforcement is given for strong work, and students enjoy writing. The latter approach was adopted in a George Mason University small group tutorial program for writers of both native English and English as a second language (ESL). Initially, efforts were made to compare the writing processes and progress of native speakers and ESL students and then to integrate these findings into the teaching process. An instructional approach was developed in which students were led first into fluency, then through awareness of and distance from their own organic forms, to confidence that they could find and improve on organizational, grammatical, or mechanical writing problems. This approach helped both ESL and native speakers write better and with more enthusiasm and enjoyment. (MSE)

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FROM "COMPOSITION" TO "WRITING" -- REVISING AN EFL TRADITION

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When I first agreed to talk today about the implications for ESL teaching of recent research in writing, I planned to pull together the major studies that have revolutionized writing instruction during the past decade and a half. The more I tried to organize this paper, however, the more convinced I became that I could be more convincing and less boring by sharing what I know best -- by talking from my experience as a teacher and researcher and using my own data to organize my remarks. This is true in part because information tends to be more powerful when rooted in experience and in part because my studies organize current knowledge about writing in ways that may be of particular interest to you. But first I want to give you a challenge: I propose that as ESL teachers we stop teaching composition and adopt a new philosophy and approach -- teaching writing.

Let me support my proposal and explain it to you. I will begin by summarizing my two-year classroom ethnography of how writers teach writing (Nelson, 1981,1982). Then I'll tell you about a program I direct at George Mason University for basic writers, about half of whom are foreign students,

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* This paper was read at the WATESOL Convention at George Mason University on October 1, 1982. It was part of a panel entitled "Current Applied Research in the Four Skills." It presents the process-based approach to composition in practice at the George Mason University Composition Tutorial Center (CTC). An example of this approach appears in the next article in this volume by Linda Blair, who teaches at the CTC.

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recent refugees from third world countries, or non-native speakers with up twenty years in the United States. I use this program because it illustrates how current knowledge about teaching writing may be applied to ESL students. Finally, I'll describe the findings of the ethnographic evaluation I am currently directing for that program to illustrate what happens to ESL students' writing when they are provided with our writing-workship approach (Nelson, 1982; Nelson et al., 1982).

HOW WRITERS TEACH WRITING

Recently I spent two years studying how writers teach writing. I talked to almost 100 writers and some of their secondary-school students, did extended observations and taping in three writers' classrooms, read and listened to hours of student writing, asked the writers why in the world they taught the way they did, and eventually discarded some cherished assumptions about how I ought to teach. One unexpected finding of that study was an explanation for a sad but common phenomenon -- the high level of frustration and burnout among composition teachers. Those feelings were common to many writers and (I discovered) resulted from the kinds of teaching most of them did. All who experienced frustration were teaching "composition," not "writing" (and I use their terms). They were teaching a fallacious system discredited by a long research tradition in English Education--a system they taught because they believed it was what English teachers were"supposed to teach"--without examining their conflicting experience as writers. Because their writing and teaching were logically incompatible, I have characterized the conflict they felt with a schizophrenia metaphor: I call them "writer-schizophrenics."

Happily, writer-schizophrenics were not the only writers I found. A small but vocal minority who taught from their own experience were recognized by all who knew them as outstanding writing teachers. They saw themselves not as "English teachers" but as "writers-training-writers" and adamantly rejected the content, methods, values, and assumptions of most English instructional approaches.

"We don't teach any composition," Morty declared long-distance from

Atlanta when I was screening writers for inclusion in the study. His comment confused me. I had just explained how I was looking for writers teaching composition and had heard, from 70 miles away, that his team-mate Barbara and he were awfully good at it. Before I could respond, Morty continued, and his comment taught me the importance of examining my assumptions about my teaching: "We don't teach any composition," he said, "but our kids do a helluva lot of writing."

Now Morty didn't mean he and Barbara didn't teach essays or academic prose; they taught better than most. He meant exactly what he said: They didn't teach "composition." All the writers in my study made that same distinction; and though some taught composition, and some taught composition and writing, it was those who taught only "writing" for whom all the students learned to write well -- and that includes creative writing and academic prose alike.

What then does "writing" entail? And how does it differ from "composition?" Composition is product-oriented, focusing predominantly on forms, though teachers often retain control of students' content, too. Comp teachers teach structures directly, and unlike expert-practitioners they generally teach them first, before having students write. They may drill on spelling, vocabulary and grammar; they may do sentence combining. They may teach students to outline before writing; and they give advance instruction in things like thesis statements, topic sentences, the parts of the short story, transitional devices, methods of papagraph development, essay patterns or formulas, and the traditional modes of discourse.

Composition is the composition teacher's primary content, and it is often their basis for grades. They measure student writing by adult (or native) standards, judging the first drafts of beginners against the best contemporary prose. Their policy of deducting for deficiencies focuses on weakness, convincing teachers and students alike that few can learn to write well. After categorizing student errors, they reteach what wasn't mastered, reinforcing a downward spiral of failure for themselves and their students alike. These teachers think students should master "the basics" before doing self-motivated writing. Creative and real-world writing are reserved for a

select few, most of whom come from highly literate, standard language backgrounds. In short, "composition," as taught by the writers in my study, is a product-oriented, preventive/corrective, error-avoidance approach--an approach with a built-in, self-fulfilling prophesy of failure for teachers and their students.

Fortunately "writing" is different. Instead of focusing from the beginning on the finished product, writiers training writers lead students through the writing process--a rich and varied experience I will illustrate for you. With little explicit knowledge of linguistics, these experiential teachers intuitively creat the kinds of conditions that foster written language growth. Though classroom practice may vary due to differences in writing experience, "writing" instruction is process-based and process-perpetuating, but includes attention to products at appropriate states. After students write what they want to, for people they care about to read, writing and sharing writing become central, while structure is taught incidentally when specific problems arise. Even the multi-faceted writing process itself is taught indirectly (by teacher modeling) or incidentally (when a writer training writers feels that what a student is doing doesn't work). In short, these teachers use a writing-workshop approach because they know from their own experience that written language grows naturally, given adequate support and honest responses along the way.

All of the expert practitioners I studied teach writing similarly, regardless of the writing they do. (Some are poets, some fiction writers; others journalists or essayists.) All reproduce in their classrooms the kinds of artistic or functional writing communities they belong to in the out-of-school world. Their classes become microcosms of the real world of writing they know as they gently guide the practice of the budding writers they teach. In protective environments where students feel safe taking risks, writers training writers serve as mentors to students, they model how writers work and feel, and they import the rewards that motivate them into the classroom. Their students begin by creating whole pieces of writing -- not component parts -- for purposes of their own choosing; and these teachers respond to meanings before focusing on forms. Even when writing is weak, if

it has been seriously attempted, these teachers reinforce what is strong before addressing weaknesses, then point out unambiguously what needs further work in order for a reader to understand the piece. Why is their emphasis so supportive? They know from experience that negative criticism makes writers unable to write. In addition to being supportive, however, their responses are nothing if not frank, and after briefly watching their teachers, students begin responding in kind to each other's work.

In these writing classes students enjoy writing, rapidly grow in confidence, and refer to themselves as writers. Spontaneously analyzing the work of friends and favorite authors, they identify techniques for use in future work. Their careful attention to imagery, to diction and mechanics, of course, reflects their basic desire to be fully understood; but as time goes by, they also show a growing determination to gain prestige as writers. Vocabulary also expands naturally as students become committed to their work. I have seen seventh and eight graders, for example, picking up literary terms --at first using them awkwardly, but growing in control--because they needed more precise language for their expanding writing concerns. Such students do a lot of writing, often more than their teachers can read; and growth, often dramatic and sudden, characterizes every one. In such classrooms one finds little frustration, for writers and their students experience an upward spiral of increasing success.

The classroom success of these teachers leads them to abandon the deficiency hypothesis: No longer blaming weak writing on their students, they insist it usually reflects faulty teaching instead. Because in their writing-workshop classrooms all students learn to write, these teachers proclaim with conviction that everyone can learn to write well--that vivid, competent, moving, coherent, and unified writing is less related to intellectual ability than to affective factors. In fact, they see student fears of correction and of writing what they really feel as the primary factors interfering with student writing success. In other words, these teachers are claiming for writing what linguists have been telling teachers for years--that all people can pick up language naturally, given the right conditions.

"Writing" and "composition," then, are the two types of teaching I found,

and my program in the writing tutorial is based on what I learned in this research. Let me illustrate for you how I adopted the successful classroom practices of writers training writers to a small group tutorial approach for both ESL and native writers.

TEACHING AND DATA COLLECTING IN THE WRITING TUTORIAL CENTER

In the fall of 1981, with seven graduate studnets I was training to tutor in the new tutorial center at GMU, I began to investigate similarities and differences in how native and ESL students write. While providing the tutors intensive training in writing, I had them examine their writing processes in order to better understand their students.

In the beginning I asked tutors to assume ESL writing was fundamentally similar to the first-language writing they do. Though I was a writing specialist and teacher-trainer rather than an ESL expert, I based that assumption on my years of personal experience teaching writing, teaching EFL (including writing) in Japan, and writing (with varying degrees of experience) in English and four other languages. I was also familiar with first-language acquisition theory and research.

That semester I began observing ESL students in my other writing classes, and the tutors and I began documenting changes in our tutorial students' writing. With students' permission we recorded factors that affected their work -- we wrote up our interactions with them, interviews with their other writing teachers, information they volunteered, and their answers to our questions about their work. Although after a year and a half we now have evidence comparing how first - and second-language writers write, our initial purposes in evaluating our own teaching were 1) to check out my assumption that ESL and native writing are similar so we could revise our teaching quickly if it did not work and 2) to continually improve our teaching of all students.

This is how we began. We treated ESL students as we treated native speakers, mixing them in groups of four or five for two writing workshops a week. We reduced their anxiety by praising the well-written and interesting parts of their writing and by eliminated grades on individual pieces of

work. We also established a trusting atmosphere so students could take risks: A sign created by a newly enthusiastic writer proclaims in bold letters from the center door, "SANCTUARY--Safe Writing Done Here." And because of the vulnerability good writing demands, we warned that to continue in the center and to earn certification, students must never respond to others' writing in careless or destructive ways.

At first we urged students to forget about neatness and correctness in order to write freely ("the way you talk") and with (not about) feelings. The purpose was to get ideas flowing by locating topics they felt strongly abouty so they would care enought about their writing to want to work hard on it. For terribly anxious writers, who could tell but not write their ideas, we helped them "write it the way you just said it" until they could do it for themselves. But we didn't let them rely on such freewriting for long. Soon we began showing them how to gain distance on their work and how to refocus on form to shape and edit their drafts by adding to, tightening, or rearranging the thinking they had done. And always we gave support and specific advice while encouraging students to experiment with content and with form.

Of course we responded to errors, but only after students made them -- and after problems of organization and clarity had been solved. In our work with grammar and mechanics we followed several rules of thumb. We limited each student's focus to one or two highly stigmatized patterns at a time in order to build their confidence through rapid improvement. (We let some less abrasive errors wait indefinitely.) We also concentrated on more easily teachable features (verb agreement, past tense endings, and tense sequence, for example) as they occurred in individual pieces, matter of factly supplying the more gradually acquired features (articles, idioms, prepositions) when students couldn't correct or avoid problems on their own. And we suggested the strategies we ourselves use to improve our own writing.

Over and over again we led students through the phases of writing, from finding ideas and getting them down on paper to revising, editing, publishing, and learning from audience response. And as we worked together at these layered and shifting concerns, we focused their attention on discovering what strategies worked best for them. We encouraged them to look inward, to

identify and follow their natural impulses, and we pointed out instances where doing so improved what they wrote. With time we built their confidence enough to rely on their own intuitions, even when they ran counter to what they had always been taught. Then we gradually withdrew leadership to serve largely as resources while the students assumed control of their writing and learning in the workshop groups.

At its best our teaching was a recursive process in which we led students first into fluency with words and ideas, next through awareness of and distance on their own organic forms, and finally to confidence that they could find and improve (or avoid) everything from organizational problems to grammatical and mechanical concerns. Ath the same time we were refining our understanding of students' learning and our individual teaching styles.

WHAT WE LEARNED ABOUT HOW ESL STUDENTS WRITE AND LEARN TO WRITE

When we used the methods of writers training writers with our ESL students, they responded in both expected and unexpected ways. Though I knew that first- and second-language writing were similar, I also knew first-hand that second-language writers face additional tasks. What I did not fully anticipate, however, was the extent to which good ESL writers handle those tasks with the same strategies native writers use; for though we teach only "basic" and ESL writers in the center, we see the same kinds of growth observed in writers-training-writers' classrooms, and we find few differences between strategies used by the two groups. Certainly there are differences between ESL and native writers, and there are differences among the many cultural groups who come to us, but we find they are no greater than the differences among individuals and can be handled as we handle all writing problems -- incidentally, as they arise.

Before a week had passed, we were finding both written and behavioral evidence that strengthened our confidence in my assumption "writing" would help all students improve. In the groups students read aloud and discussed each others' work -- daily drafts, vivid bits of freewriting published weekly as "CTC Excerpts," and outstanding final products (sometimes with eight or ten

drafts attached) that we displayed on three bulletin boards. Sharing and responding helped students discover subjects they wanted to write about; when they saw how others' writing could hold a group spellbound, they began taking papers away "to work on at home" and bringing in self-sponsored pieces of writing to share. Discovering their own favorite topics and finding them pleasing to others led to breakthroughs in attitude and commitment to their work. Among both basic and ESL students, some began revising and editing spontaneously, and those who did not picked up strategies from the groups, for getting responses from listeners and readers increased their objectivity. Sharing illustrated concretely what worked or fell flat in writing, and constructive criticism helped students evaluate their work by increasingly sophisticated standards -- standards they picked up and refined through experience, with direct instruction.

The first ESL freewrites ("write quickly without stopping or worrying about organization, neatness or correctness") tend to flow more smoothly, to follow the rhythms of English prose, and to have more vivid imagery and detail than the self-conscious placement essays students wrote the week before. Though students from some cultures take longer to relax and freewrite, when our students hear marked improvement in the writing of others who take risks, they learn to back away from familiar rules and formats that have inhibited and distorted their earlier work. Their writing begins to be structured by their intuitively acquired language competence; it is no longer cramped and deformed by what conscious rules can generate. This change leads to another breakthrough for most students, convincing them not only that we can help them but that they can learn to write well.

Student freewrites typically reflect, though imperfectly, the patterns inherent in their ideas. Increasingly skillful comments from the workshop groups help them make those patterns explicit in their later drafts, particularly as they discover through writing what they really want to say. The smooth flowing of ideas reduces global errors -- those baffling syntactic convolutions that mar most entry essays and are often responsible for students' being sent to the center in the first place. At the lexical and grammatical levels we also find some changes -- fewer article and preposition

errors and fewer misused words. And for the occasional student with severe spelling anxiety, spelling also spontaneously improves when evaluation anxiety disappears.

These findings are consistent with my own predictions that ESL and native writers develop similarly. When students stop focusing on structure, anxiety and avoidance behavior diminish, and certain features of their writing improve immediately (for specific case study evidence see Blair, present volume, and Nelson et al. 1982). Our data also illustrate a complementary tendency, for not all language features improve when students stop worrying about form. Freewriting is not a cure-all for writing; it's an early stage in the process, and the same first freewrites that improve regress in other ways. Lapses in verb agreement, in past-tense morpheme errors, and in unifying or transitional devices may occur. Punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphing may become unstable; and misspellings sometimes increase as students stop avoiding words they can't spell. But ESL and "basic" writers learn not to let these errors disturb them; for when they read their work aloud and as they scan their drafts, they begin to perform the kinds of functions required for revising and editing.

This emerging ability to recognize and correct or avoid errors, once students learn to separate the sub-tasks of writing and order them sequentially, explains a common"composition" - classroom phenomenon -- the fact that many students can apply rules in exercises but not during writing. Like Krashen's (1981) Monitor over-users, they are simply unable to attend to all sub-tasks of writing at once. The problem is not that students can't locate and handle many writing concerns by conscious implicit and explicit scanning on their own; it's that attempting to avoid all errors while generating ideas is so unreasonable a task that even potentially excellent writers give up in confusion and despair.

Once students have succeeded at the freewriting we suggest at first, we regularly suggest two strategies for improving freewrites they produce though we find that some spontaneously discover these strategies on their own. Aural and visual scanning -- listening to writing as though through others' ears and reading through others' eyes -- are distancing mechanisms that help writers

evaluate their drafts by filtering bits of tentative texts through their intuitive competence and heightening their awareness of alternatives. Both these strategies expand students' confidence in the intuitive knowledge they already possess but have so far been unable to use effectively when writing.-

The ability to listen as if through writers' ears grows with reading aloud, first in the workshop groups and later to themselves. Scanning segments that "don't sound right," students contrast the semantic and syntactic features they hear (word order, word choice, parallelism) to those they are accustomed to hearing and learn to notice the dissonance they feel when the two don't correspond. When they first share in the groups, moreover, our students are unaware that what they read aloud may differ from what they have actually written. As they read they regularly supply omitted features (function words, suffixes). They also fill in needed details, stumble over imprecise or phony wording, or rephrase unclear parts. They tend to make the tone more conversational, and to abandon passive constructions. Aural scanning helps them recognize what they have unconciously corrected and builds confidence in their existing ability to improve their work.

Much as with listening to writing, seeing it (especially in print) helps writers discover spots that "don't look right." Typing is particularly helpful with mechanics (spelling, paragraph length) because it makes handwritten drafts look so much more like print -- that more standard form in which students find most of the writing they read. Visual like aural scanning is another mechanism by which students can tap their receptive knowledge of the written code.

Though intuitive oral and written competence is usually partial and flawed, especially for the ESL and "basic" writers we teach, it is more comprehensive and accurate than the rule systems our students have learned. Unschooled writers like our "basic" writers, know few explicit rules and have trouble applying the ones they "know." After bringing their intuitive competence to bear on the writing they have done, however,students engage their explicit knowledge of rules, systematically scanning their writing for problems they have missed. At this point they experience another breakthrough leading to further improvements in the writing they produce: bumping up

against the actual limits of their knowledge, students find they can recognize them.

Reaching the borders of their (implicit and explicit) knowledge has been happening all along, of course; the psychological breakthrough occurs when students recognize what they do not (or may not) know, allowing them for the first time to trust the knowledge they have. Separating and ordering writing tasks has reduced the confusion of single-draft composing and made it possible to focus on one task at a time. No longer overwhelmed by realistic anxiety, students have gotten in touch with their dissonance -- those fainter feelings that signal when writers are approaching the limits of what they know. At this point, we observe two behaviors which were common before: 1) seeking information to correct what has been written and 2) remembering (as shown by future use) the information found. Before I describe how the psychological breakthrough leads to improvements in writing, let me offer a concrete example of how dissonance is recognized.

For many very poor spellers who have given up trying to spell correctly, suggesting that dissonance occurs and that writers can watch for it provides a strategy for identifying actual and potential mistakes, making systematic correction possible fo the first time. Depending on their primary cognitive approaches, spellers may detect dissonance (we say "feelings of uncertainty" with students) either during initial word production or laterduring visual scanning; for some it occurs during initial word production or later during visual scanning; for some it occurs at both points. After I identified the strategy for finding errors by looking closely at how I identify misspellings in my own writing, the tutors and I found two types of evidence that the strategy may account for some improvements in student work. We found problem spellers who had become aware of errors when the pressure of first-draft evaluation disappeared. We also saw rapid improvement in the work of some other spellers after we suggested they watch for "feelings of uncertainty." Such improvements are possible when students learn to recognize the feelings of dissonance associated with any type of error they make.

The attitudinal breakthrough that occurs when students recognize the limits of their certain knowledge motivates increases in three types of

behavior, and these student-motivated increases account for many improvements in our students' work:

1. asking a tutor or other student to supply a rule or form,
2. trying to think of another way to express what they want to say, and
3. referring to handbooks or other references to find the information they need

The order in which the use of these strategies tends to increase is related to growing independence and to the increasing responsibility students are taking for their own learning. The more passive "show me how" or "teach me again" response is typical of early stages in the shift from "composition" to "writing" when students still perceive writing as something they do for the teacher. The second and third responses are active "writing" strategies and reflect increases in commitment and confidence. Students regularly attempt the intuitive method of generating alternatives before resorting to the less convenient search for missing knowledge. Traditionally, "composition" teachers have expected students to begin with the strategy that emerges latest and requires the most energy and motivation. The fact that this development can take place naturally suggests that evaluating the beginners' behavior by experienced (target) standards is both inappropriate and unnecessary.

In addition to our on-going ethnography in the center, evidence of our "writing" program's success comes from other sources. We get reports from students, and from faculty members as well. One important indicator is that our students apply the strategies we teach them to other university and job-related writing. Soon they are freewriting and drafting academic papers (at home) and producing acceptable work for both "composition" and subject-area teachers. Even when their assignments require highly structured formats, most feel confident enough to cope with the constraints (though they sometimes complain that in doing so they make their writing worse instead of better). Faculty members from across the campus send students to us for help, express pleasure at the progress their students make, and ask us to supply tutors for their departmental tutorial programs. Many of our students make A's and B's

in freshman writing courses. Others attend the center voluntarily on a regular basis because they hear that we can help them learn to write better. Still others return, after earning certification, to spend an additional (non-credit) semester writing in the center.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The writing and teaching strategies I report helped both ESL and "basic" writers, but two stand out as primary and prerequisite to the others: Unless students separate the sub-tasks of writing and then sequence them, few of the learning and writing behaviors we desire are possible. Like the writing process itself, the process of learning to write is itself recursive and largely intuitively acquired. Growing as a writer is a non-linear, holistic process facilitated by membership in a writing community and requiring opportunities to elaborate what is learned by cycling through the phases of writing time and time again.

Writing in a second language is a complex task. Its demands are both equal to and greater than those native writers face though second-language writers use the same strategies. As teachers of ESL writing, you will find the strategies that work for native language instruction appropriate for ESL classrooms as well; I say this from experience, for, in fact, two former tutors and I are currently using them in classrooms at GMU. Despite the apparent weaknesses students bring to our classes, ESL writing need not be viewed as a deficient form once the processes by which it is produced are understood. Student errors rarely indicate lack of writing capability. In the first place, the most distressing are instruction induced. In addition, once "composition" prescriptions and standards are abandoned, students working in classrooms modeled after real-world writing communities pick up what they need to write well quickly, through practice and reader responses. Adopting a "writing" approach leads to improvements for all students, but even more important, for our two groups in the center, are the attitudinal changes that release language learning abilities and motivate writing and learning. The key to teaching writing increasingly seems to be allowing students to follow their natural language impulses and encouraging them to trust whatever works for them, even when it conflicts with past instruction or the advice of other

writers.

Implementing a "writers-training-writers" program requires an about-face in our thinking. It means rejecting the deficiency hypothesis which blames poor writing on students. It means accepting responsibility for the learning barriers we have erected and doing whatever is necessary to free our students to learn. Teaching "writing" means taking a leap of faith; it means acting as if we believe our students can write by reinforcing the strengths they have and trusting others to emerge. It means looking at our students' writing from a totally new perspective. Traditional "composition" carefully examines the beakers of knowledge students bring into the classroom and not (objectively) that they are half empty. Writing, by contrast, measures the same knowledge and reports that the beakers are half full. In short, teaching writing is an existential proposition, for we teachers control the release of student potential by the choices we make.

Today I end my talk by returning to the beginning and repeating the challenge I offered to you there -- to reject "composition" instruction and the unnecessary problems it creates for students who war trying to learn to write and adopt a writer-training-writers approach in your ESL classes.

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